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978-0-521-03761-7 - The Physical Basis of Predication

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This is a book about some of the basic concepts of metaphysics: universals, particulars, causality, and possibility. Its aim is to give an account of the real constituents of the world.

The author defends a realistic view of universals, characterizing the notion of universal by considering language and logic, possibility, hierarchies of universals, and causation. On the other hand, he argues that logic and language are not reliable guides to the nature of reality. All assertions and predications about the natural world are ultimately founded on “basic universals”, which are the fundamental type of universal and central to causation. A distinction is drawn between unified particulars (which have a natural principle of unity) and arbitrary particulars (which lack such a principle); unified particulars are the terms of causal relations and thus real constituents of the world. Arbitrary particulars such as events, states of affairs, and sets have no ontological significance.

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# *The physical basis of predication*

*Andrew Newman*  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*



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## *Introduction*

The aim of this book is to give an account of which things are the “real constituents of the world”. The account is based, to begin with, on a characterization of the notion of universal. It also attempts to decide which particulars are real constituents of the world, and in doing so argues against events, and things like events, in a number of different ways. The focus is on causality, particularly the notion of causal relation, as a guide to what is real.

The central theme is that the natural world is a world of particulars and universals as understood by immanent realism. In order to make that more precise, I argue that it is special sorts of universals – namely, basic universals – and special sorts of particulars – namely, unified particulars – which are the real constituents of the world. It is not part of my intention to show that immanent realism is the correct theory of universals, since there are other works that do that, notably Armstrong’s. In the course of the discussion, however, arguments will be given that will show the superiority of that theory. The work should be regarded as being in the area of metaphysics or general ontology; epistemology and semantics will, on the whole, be avoided. My interest is in how things are, not in how we come to know how they are. I hope the conclusions can serve as metaphysical foundations for scientific realism, while avoiding attachment to any particular scientific theory.

The discussion of universals has two aims, the first of which is to give an account of the nature of universals. The notion of universal is conceptually difficult, controversial, and in need of explanation. The sort of explanation offered is really a characterization: It is given in terms of such things as the multiple occurrence of universals, the structure of logic and language, the notion of possibility, hierarchies of universals, and causality. In the course of the discussion of language and logic, I argue that neither is a reliable guide to the nature

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of reality, despite the fact that they can be used to give a partial characterization of the notion of universal.

The second aim is to introduce the notion of “basic universal” as the fundamental type of universal. In the language of determinates and determinables, they are perfectly determinate, non-conjunctive universals. They determine how a particular is in a certain respect without any possibility for further details to be given about how the particular is in that respect. They are not general universals, since they do not classify other universals. I suggest that all assertions and predications about the natural world are ultimately based on these basic universals; they are the physical basis of predication of the title. In this sense – that is, with respect to universals – my theory is a form of metaphysical atomism.

In my discussion of which things are real, my starting point is the notion of basic attribute, where a basic attribute is monadic, attributive basic universal. Not all predicates correspond to universals, and among universals only some are what I call basic attributes. The notion of a basic attribute can be given a fairly general characterization that does provide motivation for regarding basic attributes as being of primary ontological significance. Which things are in fact examples of basic attributes, however, has to be agreed *a posteriori*. This is explained in Chapter 4. I argue that things such as the simple shapes and the simple properties of physics (e.g. mass and charge) satisfy the account just given of basic attributes. It is also generally accepted that these attributes are causally significant, if anything is, so they can be taken as real constituents of the world.

In the same way that their significance in causality is one of the reasons for singling out basic attributes as being of primary importance, it is causality that motivates my preference for unified particulars. I suggest that particulars can be divided into two sorts: arbitrary particulars and unified particulars. Unified particulars are particulars that have a natural principle of unity, such as our familiar material objects. Arbitrary particulars, on the other hand, do not have a natural principle of unity: What makes them units is the choices of human beings. The examples of arbitrary particulars that I consider are sets, events, and parcels of matter. I argue that only unified particulars are the terms of causal relations, so it is unified particulars that are real constituents of the world. Our world then

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is a world of unified particulars and basic universals – monadic, dyadic, and so on. The ontology developed in this work differs, therefore, from Armstrong's in that it is sparser and more economical: We do without such things as events, facts, and states of affairs.

Particulars such as events do not possess basic attributes; for example, it seems fairly clear that they do not possess mass or energy, and consequently do not enter into causal relations. This is not the only reason for thinking that events are not the terms of causal relations, and in fact in the course of this work I shall give a number of different reasons that fall into five main groups (summarized at the end of Chapter 7).

In the end, I single out three types of thing as having primary ontological significance: unified particulars, basic attributes and relations, and causal relations. Causal relations are a type of basic universal that has a special place in my ontology. Each of these three types of thing figures in a causal situation in a different way.

In our description of the natural world, we do not always use predicates that signify basic universals. And the more complicated forms that we do use do not always represent an arbitrary way of thinking about basic universals. Basic universals have an ontologically significant structure, and there are relations between them that are also ontologically significant. So it is not true that only predications involving basic universals are ontologically significant.

I consider only two examples of these predications that have a more complex basis. Firstly, I consider natural kind terms, suggest that they refer to universals, and discuss briefly the basis natural kinds have in basic universals. Secondly, I consider higher-level universals, which raises the old problem of determinates and determinables. Higher-level universals are universals that are more general than basic universals and can be said to classify them. My position is that higher-level universals are properties of particulars, not of lower-level universals, and that the relation between a lower-level universal and the corresponding higher-level universal is an internal relation, which I call 'essential subordination'.

The final picture I present of the world shows it as primarily a world of basic universals and unified particulars, which are rightly called real constituents of the world, but it includes other things such as natural kind universals, higher-level universals, and relations between universals, which are also ontologically significant. This is

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a two-tier ontology: There are the real constituents of the world, basic universals and unified particulars, which are in a sense isolable, and then there are structural features of those real constituents, which are ontologically significant in a secondary way.